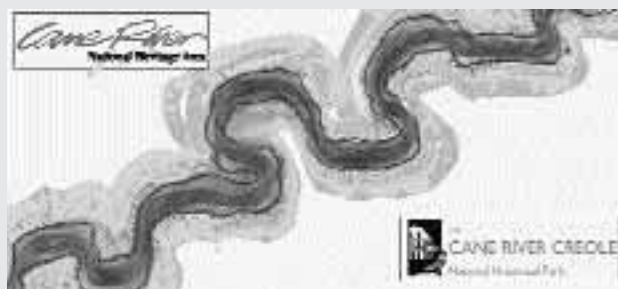


## *In the Cradle of Creole Culture*

Along a quiet bend of Cane River Lake, created by a dam on a finger of the Red River in 1835, lay a cluster of antebellum plantations. Plantations with names that echo provincial France or the tranquility of seasonal beauty for which this region of north central Louisiana is well known. Near the historic town of Natchitoches (pronounced nack-a-tosh), the first French colonial settlement in Louisiana, plantations such as “Oakland” and “Magnolia,” now known as Cane River Creole National Historical Park, provide a picturesque invitation, opening the pathway into a unique insight on antebellum Louisiana lifestyle and culture. These plantation titles, however, belie a controversial, yet piquant topic in historical multiculturalism.

The economic growth of 18th-century French colonial Louisiana was based on the fertility of alluvial river bottoms, built up from millions of years of soil deposits. But the agricultural wealth produced from sugar cane, cotton, corn, and indigo was not a short-term development. Labor was the critical element throughout the agricultural experiments with various crops in the region...and labor was provided by slavery. The historical apologia for the introduction of Africans into slavery in the French colony is much the same as that given a century earlier at Jamestown, Virginia, or two centuries earlier by the Portuguese and the Spaniards. This was the need to produce crops in quantity for export and to conquer the challenges of a severe climate. The region of West Africa known collectively as the Senegambia, provided the regional source of native Africans for bondage in Louisiana. By the early 19th century, the Atlantic slave trade began to gradually give way to an interregional trade in lives that extended from the Eastern seaboard of the United States to Spanish Texas. However, in Louisiana, a continual influx of native Africans produced a strong culture of religious practices and belief that often challenged their condition of servitude.

The French enslavers began to intermix Africans from other regions on their plantations by way of the interregional slave trade and identify first-generation Africans born in Louisiana as “Creole.” The colonial Portuguese of Brazil used the



term “crioulo” to similarly distinguish native Africans from those born in the Western hemisphere and presumably more accustomed to the culture of slavery. On the sugar plantations of the Caribbean colony of St. Dominique, the French planters had attempted to thereby reduce the threat of uprisings from native Africans by depending more on the “Creole” whose identifier increasingly became more racial as the product of interracial liaisons with African women in bondage increased. After the freedom uprising of 1793 on St. Dominique, which the victors renamed Haiti, many French planters fled to Louisiana intending to recreate their empires. Seeking a distinction from native French and other European nationalities in Louisiana, the planters began to refer to themselves as “Creole” or second-generation French colonials. Such a lilting, poetic moniker appealed to the planters who continued their unique reference into the African occupation of the territory.

Today, between the descendants of those enslaved and those enslavers there is an age-old insistence upon the rights to the name “Creole.” The racial and social-elitist overtones, which accompany this ideal today, are products of the institution of slavery and the forced system of caste, which developed ante- and post bellum in Louisiana. With the title goes the credit for a unique architecture of wrought iron and cupolas constructed from native soils and foliage, the distinctively tantalizing cuisine of local seafood and spices...and the music for which the world has come to know Louisiana. But who will account for the bondage of thousands of Africans who were first labeled “Creole” and who lived their lives and died in anonymity, so that others would someday claim the now respectable distinction, “I am Creole”?

*Carla F. Cowles  
Interpretive Park Ranger  
Cane River Creole National Historical Park*